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ABSTRACT

For many years, Northern Ireland has been living under the shadow of civil strife. These years have produced relatively little literature, either adult or juvenile, which deals directly with the so-called "troubles." Literature can play an important role guiding against prejudicial attitudes and in educating individuals about society as a whole. This paper discusses novels for adults and adolescents that deal with the IRA (Irish Republican Army), antagonism between Protestant and Catholic communities, and other related political and social problems. Two writers are featured as having captured the essence of life in Northern Ireland, John Lingard and Martin Waddell (who also uses the name Catherine Sefton). A bibliography of their works is included. (AEF)

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Literature in a Divided Community

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For twenty-five years Northern Ireland has been living under the shadow of civil strife, which means that the young people of the present community have known no other way of life. While the violence highlighted on newsreels is in no way a total picture of life in the Province, it is a factor which, directly or indirectly, impinges on everyone's life and colors one's thinking. Efforts to introduce such themes as Cultural Heritage and Education for Mutual Understanding into the school curriculum are at best limited, at worst merely cosmetic, and many young people have adopted an attitude of healthy cynicism, or have left the Province for life in Great Britain or further afield. The present so-called "peace process" has at best modified the tensions and afforded people a more normal existence, a state which has very quickly been seized upon as the only acceptable one.

Surprisingly, these twenty-five years have produced relatively little literature, either adult or juvenile, which deals directly with the so-called "Troubles". Perhaps writers feel too close to the events, and in another quarter of a century there will be a flood of authors looking back on experience from a mature perspective and commenting on their memories modified by time. Just as the horrors of the second world war have been recaptured by writers recalling their childhood, writers such as Judith Kerr and Hans Peter Richter, so a Northern Ireland author may well feature in the reading lists of schools well into the next century. No doubt the contrast between past violence and current efforts towards reconciliation will at some future point emerge in a fictionalized form and enter the imaginative interpretations of history.

For the present, two writers stand out as having captured the essence of life in the Province. Joan Lingard, Scottish by birth but Northern Irish by upbringing, was the first to step into the heat of the religious divide with her *The Twelfth Day of July*. The title in itself says much to anyone with Ulster connections, for that is the day of the big Protestant celebrations to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne fought between William of Orange and the Catholic King James. To many Protestants this battle of 1690 seems as recent as last week, its outcome of momentous significance. Joan Lingard captures the antagonism between the Protestant and the Catholic communities, which flares up, particularly in the little working-class streets of Belfast, before and during the "Twelfth" celebrations. The Catholic community fears the triumphant marching feet of the Orangemen, the dominant roll of the Lambeg drums, and the shrill persistent note of the fife. Protestants decorate their streets with red, white and blue bunting, dance round huge bonfires, burning effigies of Catholic heroes. Behind it all lie fear and mistrust, and this is what Joan Lingard seeks to expose in her novel, written for children but with a message for adults too. The book was published in 1970, a time of great tension, with British soldiers on the streets, rioting, killing, and an ever-widening rift between the two communities. In such a situation it might well seem that literature has no place, yet Joan Lingard was quick to see the need for some sort of imaginative articulation of prejudice and violence, and she found an answering chord in the number of children and young people who responded positively to her work.

In *The Twelfth Day of July* the protagonists are Protestant Sadie and Catholic Kevin, two young people who share a working-class background in Belfast, but who differ widely in religious and thus political affiliations. The novel traces the events from the initial stirrings of trouble on the seventh of July to the sad outcome on the twelfth day itself. What was to be for the Protestant young people a day of marching and dancing has become instead a quiet day spent at the seaside with their Catholic adversaries, while a little girl, injured as a result of the antagonism, lies ill in hospital. While *The Twelfth Day of July* offers no solutions it does end on a note of reconciliation, and hints at some movement towards mutual understanding.

Significantly, the title of the sequel, *Across the Barricades*, looks at the difficulties confronting Kevin and Sadie when they meet by chance three years after the day in Bangor. The old bantering relationship re-establishes itself and they fall into a pattern of meeting for walks along the River Lagan. But as with Romeo and Juliet, family loyalties and affiliations are strong, and they

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encounter hostility from family and friends. Eventually they decide to leave Belfast and seek their fortune "across the water". *Across the Barricades* deals with their life in England, as do the other three novels in the series, *Into Exile, A Proper Place* and *Hostages to Fortune*.

More than twenty years have elapsed since Joan Lingard wrote these novels, and while the situation has changed in many ways, the world she portrays is still relevant to today's young people. The novels are read in schools as class texts, and are also popular as personal leisure reading. People and places are immediately recognizable, the speech catches the distinctive rhythms of Ulster's version of standard English, and what are known world-wide as the Ulster "Troubles" are given "a local habitation and a name".

Another writer who deals often obliquely, with the two communities of Ulster is Martin Waddell, perhaps better known for his delightful picture books for young children. Many people are not aware that the novels for older children, written under the name of Catherine Sefton, also come from the pen of Martin Waddell. Often written as adventure stories, these books have a strong narrative line, such as *Island of the Strangers*, published in 1983. Dealing ostensibly with the visit of a school party of town children to a seaside resort, the novel explores the theme of the outsider, the "alien other". Intolerance among a small group of children can be seen as a microcosm of hatred and violence in a wider community, and until the roots of prejudice are discovered and treated no progress can be made.

Another Catherine Sefton book which can be read as an adventure story but which has a Northern Ireland setting and a background of the IRA troubles is *Along a Lonely Road*, published in 1991. The setting of rural Ulster is well described, and the strains and tensions of a family under siege are memorable caught. Catherine Sefton knows Ulster and its people, can capture landscape and atmosphere, and portray its inhabitants as they really are, kind and generous, but also suspicious, closed, caught in the webs of history and prejudice. In her books it is those who dare to develop an attitude of tolerance and are prepared to look at the other person's point of view who suffer for their courage, but who are vindicated in the end.

The three novels which are usually described as the Northern Ireland trilogy, though unconnected in specific setting or in characters, do have a certain coherence and unity. *Starry Night*, the first one to be published, in 1986, and winner of The Other Award, is set in the border area between the towns of Newry in the North and Dundalk in the Republic, with the Cooley Mountains as its backdrop. *Frankie's Story*, first published in 1989, is set in a town in an unspecified part of Northern Ireland, as is *The Beat of the Drum*, which appeared in 1989. All three stories take place against a background of the warring forces of Loyalists and Republicans, with the British Army caught in the center of the struggle. In all the novels young people come face to face with the problems of growing up in a world of suspicion and fear, of irrational prejudice and its results.

Frankie, in *Frankie's Story*, strives to live with a troubled home life and the constant threat of the political situation. She eventually leaves the province for life in England, looking forward to freedom but regretting the loss of the beauty of the mountains and the sea beside which she has spent her childhood and youth. This choice of a bid for freedom may strike a chord in many young people in Ulster, who leave perhaps for a university education and do not return, or those who feel compelled to leave and seek a new life at the end of compulsory schooling. To find choices articulated in fiction and to which young readers may relate is a valuable dimension in the reading of novels, and in this way Catherine Sefton's work offers more than mere entertainment.

Perhaps the strongest and best book of the trilogy is *The Beat of the Drum*, the only one of the three written from a Protestant standpoint, and described as being "for older readers". The drum of the title is the same Protestant drum that was beating in Joan Lingard's *The Twelfth Day of July*, and it is an ominous note that is truck in Brian Hanna's street:

> The demented beating of Ollie's drum echoed up and down the Road, and round the side streets, but it wasn't a heart beat, although it made the blood race.
>
> It was the bam-bam-bam of something waiting to burst.

The protagonist, Brian Hanna, has been badly injured as a baby in an IRA bomb attack in which his parents were killed. Although dependent on his uncle and aunt, and his friends who take him out "wheelies" in his wheelchair, he is not resentful of his lot, and looks on his world with

humor and without bitterness. Like Frankie, he contemplates escape and a new life in England after the school leaving examinations, though unlike her he would like to go somewhere not too far away from home. However, the events of the week of the drums make him decide to stay for he knows that running away will not solve anything:

> "You don't have to stay because of me", Auntie Mae said. "You aren't responsible for other people. You don't owe anybody anything".
>
> But she was wrong.
>
> I am responsible. That's why I'm staying here.

The shock of his friend 's death, and the realization that Hicky has died as an informer, strengthen Brian's resolve to stay in the Province where he belongs, however harsh its punishments and retributions. The discovery of Hicky's body is treated tersely, matter-of-factly, as the rhythms of ordinary life beat out their routines:

> A woman out with her dog found him in the bushes at Hay Street, where the Community Garden for the Old Folk is going to be.
>
> Hicky didn't die there.
>
> He died somewhere else, local, in one of the little houses or somebody's coal shed, and then they dumped him with the rubbish, in the bushes, for the dogs to sniff at.
>
> There was a lot of blood in the sack.

The novel is realistic, sharp, immediate, and it leaves a lasting impression on the reader. One comes to know Brian's world and its limits, the streets, the park and the Road, the kindly but perplexed people, the potential terrorist and the bigoted informer. If there is a note of hope in the novel it lies in Brian's decision to remain in the Province, bearing witness to the sanity and tolerance which must prevail over mindless violence and prejudice if the two communities are to find common ground.

In education in Northern Ireland and more especially in Protestant schools, English teaching has always been fairly heavily weighted towards English or Anglo-Irish writers rather than towards writers of the Celtic tradition. In Catholic schools, however, one finds an emphasis on Irish mythology, Irish folk tales, and Irish writers such as Frank O'Connor or Liam O'Flaherty. More recently, with the initiatives of Cultural Heritage and Education for Mutual Understanding, the Irish tradition is being introduced also into Protestant schools, the Irish language is being taught in a variety of neutral environments so that it can be seen as a non sectarian language, the common inheritance of all Irishmen and women. There is a wealth of literature, both Anglo-Irish and Celtic Irish, which should be filling the shelves of our libraries, and it is not enough to salve our consciences with Joan Lingard and Martin Waddell. Our school libraries cater for pupils up to the age of eighteen, and these students are entitled to encounter adult writers - poets, novelists, dramatist, short story writers - from both traditions so that they can develop an appreciation of a country quite remarkably rich in literary tradition. A country which has produced Oliver Goldsmith, Jonathan Swift, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Maria Edgeworth, William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Maurice O'Sullivan, Sean O'Casey, John Millington Synge, Seamus Heaney and Louis McNeice, must cherish its literary heritage and rejoice in new voices making themselves heard.

So one may well ask what is the role of fiction, or of literature in general, in seeking resolution of conflict Reading about one's own community may well focus attention on elements of what may be seen merely as a passing phantasmagoria to young people caught up in the immediate demands of home and school and adolescence. It may also turn attention away to wider issues and problems in the world, and thus show local problems from a different perspective, as small but significant in a world where intolerance abounds, where prejudice can poison personal and public life. If a writer can warn his readers against such attitudes and guide them into a sane and

balanced way of life then fiction has an important role to play in the education of the individual and ultimately in society as a whole.

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